

THE DARK SIDE IN TODAY'S WORLD
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent
Based on John 3:17-21, Ephesians 6:12-13

The sermon this morning is the beginning of a five-part sermon series entitled, "Christ versus the Powers of Evil." Last Sunday morning, when churches across America were remembering the victims of the Brussels terrorist attacks, a new, even worse terrorist act was unfolding, claiming more than 70 dead. In Lahore, Pakistan, a suicide bomber struck a city park with a collection of children's amusement rides. The target was Christian families who presumably would be celebrating there on Easter. Most of the victims were actually Muslims. But while the suicide bomber could not tell the difference between Christians and Muslims, one thing had to be clear to the suicide bomber—most of the people around those rides were women and children.

The sheer evil of it leaves us not only repulsed but struggling to comprehend how human beings could act like this. How do we make any sense out of the sort of horrendous evil that we are seeing in the world? Moreover, how can we respond to such evil in a way that good will triumph in the end? Where is God in all this? Is there hope for the future? These are the questions that will be at the center of this sermon series. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

The latest episode of the Star Wars epic that came out a few months ago presented viewers afresh with the image of the Force: a power that undergirds all things and with which good people can connect so as to be empowered to do good things—there's a lot of symbolism there that reflects the whole Biblical idea of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, the Star Wars epic portrays the idea of the Dark Side of the Force—that people can come under the influence of a dark spiritual power that moves them to do evil. This image of the "dark side" actually draws on one of the most age-old perceptions in the history of religion—human beings have repeatedly sensed that there are dark spiritual powers at work in the world; there are evil spiritual forces that can in some way take hold of people and create havoc in human society. Those dark spiritual powers have been conceived in different ways at different times in different religions. Sometime the dark powers are thought of as personal spiritual entities—evil spirits consciously at work for ill. Sometimes the dark powers have been envisioned as coming from a malevolent god, or perhaps they are the dark side of capricious gods. Or the dark power may be conceived in more impersonal terms, as in the movie, Star Wars. The New Testament time period was one in which people generally thought of the dark powers as demonic beings, and so you will find this world view reflected in many of the stories in the New Testament. But while people have thought of the dark powers in various ways, the apostle Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, summed things up well and offered a timeless assessment of our human situation as he said, "Our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the

rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:12)

This is exactly what we are experiencing today. In world terrorism, we are not just confronting an assortment of individual bad people; as Paul says, we are not just dealing with enemies of flesh and blood. We are confronting a “power of darkness”; we are dealing with a force of evil sweeping our world that is far larger than the wickedness of particular individuals. We have seen this sort of thing before. In Germany during the Nazi period, individual Germans who were polite to their neighbors, and who even thought of themselves as religious, were caught up in a huge, violent hate movement that brought about horrendous mass killings. People can become swept up in a tide of evil that far transcends the wrongs that would come from any one individual alone. This is why Paul uses sweeping language as he speaks of “cosmic powers” and “forces of evil in the heavenly places.” He moves us to take seriously the way that evil can become an overarching force that captivates and ruins people—a “cosmic power.”

But lest we think of human beings as mere victims or pawns of some evil power, the Bible is very clear as to the ultimate source of evil. The root of evil is human sin—our turning away from God, our choosing to pursue our own aims and follow our own passions rather than to follow God. The Star Wars epic has a very interesting way of portraying this Biblical theme. In the Star Wars movies, no one is compelled to go to the Dark Side. People are seduced by the Dark Side—seduced by the possibility of power, lured into giving full vent to their anger and hate—and people give in to the Dark Side; they choose to go over to evil. This is a rather exact reflection of Biblical ideas. No one is controlled by evil. People give in to temptation and anger and hatred, and finally choose the dark path. As Jesus said in the passage we heard from the gospel of John, “People have loved darkness rather than light.” (John 3:19)

Thus even if people are swept up by an evil movement, they are finally responsible for their deeds. In the aftermath of World War II, there was a lot of discussion among German theologians about how Germans had become swept up by an overarching power of evil, and there was the suggestion that Germans had become victims of a kind of collective demonic possession. The great theologian Karl Barth objected to this line of thinking and said, “Why all this talk about the demonic? Why not just admit that we were idiots.”

The buck stops at the human heart. We are each accountable to God. We each finally choose either the light or the darkness. But precisely here we have a problem—none of completely chooses the light, but we are all affected by sin, we all in various ways fall away from God. Moreover, we are all assailed by the Dark Side—we are all drawn by temptations, we are afflicted with fears and regrets, we are subject to anger and resentment; and against the huge problem of cosmic evil in the world at large we have no answer.

The answer comes in Jesus Christ. Christ puts us right with God, enabling us who are sinners to nevertheless enter into God's light. And as we are reconciled with God, Christ empowers us to withstand the attacks and the influence of evil forces in our world. In this regard, Paul in our passage in Ephesians used the image of "the armor of God" [*Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on the evil day.*

Ephesians 6:13] It is dramatic image of how Christ will give us the power to stand firm in the face of all the evils of our day. We will pursue this theme further next Sunday, in a sermon entitled, "Christ against the Demons," as we consider how Christ can free us from various negative spiritual forces that would assail us in life.

But even if Christ empowers us individually to resist evil, what is the answer to the terrible evil that is raging in the world at large, particularly the evil of Islamist terrorism? What the Bible helps us to understand is that we need to do more than look at the social, historical, and economic factors that contribute to people becoming terrorists, although those factors are important. We need to recognize also the spiritual nature of the problem, for the problem at its heart is precisely one of twisted spirituality. In the Star Wars epic, the idea of people "going over to the dark side" portrays a major theme in the history of religion—that spirituality, which ought to be good, can become profoundly twisted, and the twisting results in something very evil. Today, if you look at Islam, the central tenets are the so-called five pillars, which call people to believe in God, pray regularly, give to the poor, and engage in spiritual disciplines for self-improvement, namely fasting and pilgrimage. Leading Muslim scholars say that this boils down to loving God and loving your neighbor. That sounds familiar. So how does this get twisted into a cult that glorifies hatred, violence, and death?

It all happens through the interplay of human sin and the overarching power of evil. Seen from a spiritual perspective, the radical Islamist movement is rooted in human sinfulness. People who felt rage over perceived grievances, who felt resentment and hatred toward others, and who felt the lure of power and significance yielded to those dark impulses and came together into an evil spiritual movement, a movement which promised revenge and power to its adherents. The movement used the symbols and language of Islam, but twisted everything, so that the devotion of adherents is not really going to God but is directed toward the self-centered desire for glory. As the movement grew, the evil of it assumed a kind of overarching power and influence, much like a mob spirit, that has progressively captivated and swept more people along. We saw a very disturbing example of that evil power and influence this past week, as a young American woman [Jaelyn Young] was arrested who had once been a cheerleader and a good college student, but who was drawn into radical Islamism, so that she celebrated the death of innocents and planned to join the Islamic State.

What then can be the answer to what is now a worldwide spiritual problem—a problem in which collective human sinfulness is both feeding into, and being nurtured and inspired by, an overarching power of evil, and in which countless lives are being ruined?

If the problem is on a cosmic spiritual scale, the answer must be on a cosmic spiritual scale. The ultimate answer is Christ. We will be pursuing exactly how Christ answers cosmic evil as this sermon series continues; we will see how Christ breaks the power of evil, how Christ will overcome evil, and how Christ assures us of final victory. But there is one key truth that undergirds everything that we can take hold of today at the outset; it is what Jesus said in our gospel passage: “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him” (John 3:17)

This is an amazing message in the face of all the horrendous evil we are seeing today, for it declares that the final answer to evil is not the condemnation of human beings but their redemption. In fact this is wondrous good news for us—for it means that in our own struggle with sin and darkness we have a Savior; and it means that while there may be all sorts of evils around us, we can find spiritual strength, we can find redemption in our own lives, and we can find real hope for the world, as we put our trust in Christ.